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ABSTRACT

It is suggested that the notion of prestige has been too readily appealed to in explanations of language variation and change, and that such appeals result in apparent contradictions and conceptual confusions. The term "prestige" has been used by sociolinguists in widely differing ways, and, as a result, the nature of the term has become somewhat vague and uncertain. In some instances, at least, a more satisfying explanation is based on the identity function of language (ethnic or gender-related), and notions of prestige can be subsumed and accounted for in identity-based explanations. This approach relies on the observation of the social functions of in-group and out-group norms and the differential social functions of local and supra-local varieties. This approach also draws on the distinction between open and closed groups, and uses a form of cost-benefit analysis in lieu of reliance on the notion of prestige. Patterns of linguistic simplification and studies of the Philadelphia community provide evidence to support this perspective. (MSE)

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THE CONCEPT OF PRESTIGE IN SOCIOLINGUISTIC ARGUMENTATION

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Introduction: Prestige, class and the tradition

In both social and historical linguistics, the notion of prestige is very frequently appealed to as an explanation for attested linguistic change. Sometimes the term prestige is used in a well-motivated way with reference to an underlying socio-economic class (SEC) model of variation; at other times it is used routinely and apparently unreflectingly. So widespread is this tendency that it seems to be worth looking in a little detail at what is meant by the term, how it intersects and overlaps with other conceptual categories (of a social and sociolinguistic kind), and, above all, to consider whether prestige can serve as a sufficiently clear and well-defined concept to rank as the bedrock of sociolinguistic explanation - as it frequently has done. This paper is a limited attempt to examine the issues arising. We notice first something that is in my view rather important, simply because we tend quite unconsciously to be conditioned by well-established ways of thinking: this is that the appeal to prestige is not an innovation in recent sociolinguistics (Labov, 1972, 1980, etc; Trudgill, 1974, etc), but has a respectable place in the historical linguistic tradition.

Whereas present-day historical linguistics is much inclined to examine the intra-linguistic constraints on language change with relatively little appeal to social factors (Kiparsky, 1988; Lightfoot, 1988), traditional historical descriptions have made frequent appeals to social factors (involving prestige) in explaining the direction of attested changes. The notion of prestige has usually been assumed to be related to status hierarchies (often vaguely conceived as synonymous with SEC) and interpreted in that dimension; thus, it has also been assumed that the higher socio-economic groups have the highest prestige. These class-related assumptions seem to have been almost taken for granted in historical argumentation since the beginning of this century. Class-difference as explanation for change and variation is prominent in the work of E H Sturtevant (1917) in the USA and that of H C Wyld (1921, 1927) in England; after that it surfaces in A S C Ross's idea of U and non-U language (1954) and in many references to the so-called anxious Middle Classes who are forever striving to be accepted by their 'betters'. Effectively, it is part of the ideology of the first half of this century - appearing to be nothing more than common sense and therefore not open to critical examination. The elitist air of this set of assumptions is well exemplified in the following comments by E H Sturtevant (1917: 26):

> Just as fashions in dress are binding upon all members of a given class and are imitated by all who look up to that class, so fashions in language are binding upon all people of culture and are followed by other members of the community to the best of their ability.

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Already in traditional historical linguistics, therefore, we seem to have a conceptualisation of sociolinguistic space that is unidimensional - a space in which the elite groups set the tone in language, dress and other cultural matters, and in which lower groups strive to imitate their lead. At worst, this can develop into a set of unanalysed assumptions about 'mainstream' culture, and the behaviour of groups that are somehow outside the mainstream is nevertheless interpreted in terms of mainstream stereotypes (for an eloquent attack on such assumptions in ethnographic work, see Cohen, 1982). There are, of course many other problems arising from such a conceptualisation, including the problem of how these elite fashions originate, and why - if they are elite and desirable - they are nevertheless subject to change within themselves. For linguistic change, however, the most immediate problem is that it has been widely shown (both in traditional work and in social dialectology) that linguistic changes do not necessarily, or even normally, originate in the elite variety (sometimes called the 'standard' variety), but often appear to spread into the elite variety 'from below'. As Strang (1970: 164) comments in her history of English:

> ... since the function of a prestige variety ... is to be the mark of a metropolitan elite, it may seem strange that the source of most innovations proves to be vulgar or dialectal speech.

In historical descriptions this apparent contradiction never seems to have been adequately resolved.

Despite this, the traditional emphasis on the prestige variety has been heavy, and the apparent contradiction has not prevented the historical tradition from giving an almost exclusive legitimacy to the history of 'standard' English . Thus, the recent history of English, as it appears in the handbooks, tends to become a unilinear history of the so-called prestige variety. This is plainly a major reason why the historical applications of secular social dialectology have become so important: they can help us to rewrite the history of English and other languages in a way that recognises the multidimensional nature of variation and change. In social dialectology, however, the concept of prestige is still very widely appealed to in explanation.

Appeals to prestige in sociolinguistic explanations

Sociolinguistic research over the past few decades has established reasonably clearly that linguistic change generally originates in casual and everyday usage rather than in the more monitored and self-conscious styles (which tend to be affected by public and even literary norms). Nevertheless, sociolinguists have continued to appeal to prestige as an explanation for change. This is often a more or less routine appeal, which does not explain exactly what prestige means in any given instance, or explain why prestige norms should be accepted by speakers in some cases, but not in others. So ingrained is the habit that the appeal to prestige can even appear in work which is critical of prestige models and which attempts to replace them by other kinds of explanation. For example, at the end of a paper in which we have proposed a social network model of change, we (J & L Milroy, 1985: 381) comment:

> ... the notion of prestige does seem to be important in explaining why one particular linguistic element is a realistic candidate for innovation while others are not.

If we do not inquire further into what we mean by 'prestige', I am not sure now that this is a very meaningful statement.

It is particularly awkward that the term has been used by sociolinguistic researchers in widely differing ways, and we shall now briefly consider an example. Quite apart form the apparent contradiction involved in the idea of covert prestige (which attempts to explain why some changes have been observed to go against 'mainstream' norms and is a useful cover-term for the kind of argument used by historical linguists also, e.g., Strang, 1970), some accounts use the idea of prestige in a very different way, which appears to overlap considerably with the notion of 'careful' or 'formal' speech.

This seems to be the case in the work of Kroch & Small, who speak of 'conscious prestige norms' (1978: 45), and suggest that prestige usages will involve, for example, use of the relative pronoun in contexts where it can be omitted. One of their findings is that television talk-show presenters favour use of the relative pronoun in contexts where their guests use it less often. This appears prima facie to be a matter of relative carefulness in a society where there is a conscious ideology of standardised and public usage. It is much less clear that it has anything to do with prestige. Finegan & Biber (1986) are quite explicit in saying that their notion of prestige is (at least up to now) not involved with socio-economic status:

> In the pilot project, prestige was gauged along two dimensions, namely physical mode (i.e., approximately spoken v written: JM) and formality. On the basis of our investigation thus far, we are not prepared to say anything about varieties used by persons of differing socioeconomic status (1986: 396).

Their hypothesis (which resembles that of Kroch & Small) is that:

> ...more prestigious varieties of English will tend to have a higher degree of isomorphism between meaning and surface form and will be characterized by fuller (as distinct from reduced) expression (1986: 392).

It can be suggested that this is simply a mis-use of the term prestige (it is particularly odd that the speech/ writing difference should be viewed in prestige terms), or, alternatively, that this notion of prestige differs sharply from the traditional and sociolinguistic use of the term. Specifically, while historical and sociolinguistic use conceives of prestige as a social category which can be used to explain linguistic patterns, the above accounts are based on assumptions about the language system: they relate prestige to non-social hierarchies of carefulness, explicitness or formality in the forms of language. Furthermore, whereas traditional assumptions appeal (however vaguely) to the role of speakers, or groups of speakers, in society, these accounts appear to be language-based, i.e., the relation of meaning to surface form becomes crucial in a

taxonomy of 'prestige' as against 'non-prestige' varieties of language (on speaker-based v system-based approaches, see further Gumperz, 1982; J & L Milroy, 1985). My main point here, however, is simply to call attention to the some of the very different ways in which the notion of prestige can be conceptualised, and hence the vague and uncertain nature of the term as it is variably used by linguists. In the next section, we shall see that Labov's account of speaker-innovation has much in common with traditional accounts and runs into some of the same conceptual difficulties.

Prestige and linguistic innovations

As we have already noticed, the difficulty in explaining why linguistic changes do not usually move in the direction of the prestige norm (as used by elite groups) is a familiar one in the tradition. Strang (1970: 164-5) notes that if change comes about in the elite language, it can only come from 'socially inferior' varieties. She then goes on to attach the term prestige to forms current in the socially inferior varieties from which the elite variety borrows. Less 'assured' speakers of the elite variety, she suggests, may perceive 'prestige' in certain forms that are, in the broad sense, socially inferior to their own. Thus, we appear to have - both in the tradition and in present-day sociolinguistics - two different senses in which the term prestige can be used (besides the other sense reviewed above: Finegan & Biber: 1986). It may seem that these two senses are mutually contradictory - or more specifically that the second sense (approximately 'covert prestige') is proposed because linguists simply cannot get away from the idea that forms adopted by a community must in some sense carry 'prestige'. It certainly appears that to use both senses of the term in the same piece of research will not be explanatory, as the mere use of the term prestige will not in itself explain why change X moves in one direction (overt prestige) and change Y in the other. As we shall see below, other bases of interpretation can be offered, which avoid this apparent contradiction.

A similar difficulty is evident in Labov's (1980: 261) characterisation of the linguistic innovator (which relies heavily on the notion of prestige). It may be summarised thus:

> (1) Speakers who lead sound change are those with the highest status in their local communities as measured by a social class index.
> (2) Among persons of equal status 'the most advanced speakers are the persons with the largest number of local contacts within the neighborhood, yet who have at the same time the highest proportion of their acquaintances outside the neighborhood'. Labov then goes on to comment 'Thus we have a portrait of individuals with the highest local prestige who are responsive to a somewhat broader form of prestige at the next larger level of social communication'.

We have noted elsewhere that a social network model cannot easily accept this account of the idealised speaker-innovator. Here, we note merely that Labov appears to use the notion of prestige in two different ways: first he presents a superordinate locus of change, depending on the broader socio-economic class distribution in the wider community (this is surely implicit in measuring the

status of the innovator by a social-class index); within this, however, he presents a more refined or micro-level locus of change within a neighbourhood group of roughly equal status. On the one hand, we have a kind of prestige that is somehow agreed on by the wider community, but on the other a micro-level kind of 'local prestige', which is presumably not the same, but which must depend on the way in which this innovator is subjectively evaluated by his peers in his local social networks. It seems appropriate to inquire into what these kinds of prestige might be, as they appear to belong to two different orders of conceptualisation.

The broader kind of prestige is predicated on the hierarchical organisation of society and derives from this, whereas local prestige would appear to depend on subjective evaluations conferred on individuals at the micro-level by members of their immediate social networks. It is of course a truism that many persons who are perceived to have high prestige at the micro-level (the leaders of street gangs, for example) may nevertheless have low prestige at the macro-level; therefore to draw a clear conceptual distinction between these two kinds of prestige seems to be essential. We may start by recalling that in historical linguistics and dialectology there are numerous cases in which patterns of diffusion cannot be explained as dependent on the first kind of prestige: prestige in the wider community.

Henning Andersen (1986), for example, points out that many changes take place which cannot be said to flow from prestige groups. He notes an example in the history of Polish, in which certain northern Polish forms (with plain labial consonants) ousted Southern Polish forms with sharped labials rather than vice versa, at a time when southern Polish speakers (around Cracow) enjoyed greater power and prestige. In his discussion, Andersen further proposes that the notion of prestige should be used with some caution and suggests that 'there is no need to postulate the strong kind of motivation (for linguistic change) implicit in the notion of prestige; it is sufficient to hypothesize a community solidarity between speakers, a bonding strong enough to find expression in the levelling of speech differences' (1986: 6). He views the notion of prestige as heavy-handed (1986: 51) and finds it more useful to think in terms of 'asymmetry of bonding, and to characterise the the attitude of the innovating community as exocentric, and that of their models as endocentric (my emphasis).' Thus, the southern Polish community, although carrying prestige (in the wide sense that we have been distinguishing) was exocentric and therefore open to outside influences.

In English historical linguistics, the history of London English is a clear case of long-term exocentrism, despite the fact that the language of the capital must have been thought to carry prestige - in some sense. Early post-Conquest London English seems to have been Southern/ South-eastern in type, but during the Middle English period it gave way to influences from the East Midlands - to such an extent that it became an East Midland dialect. By the sixteenth century certain very salient forms of Northern and East Midland origin had become firmly established - for example, the 3rd sing -s inflexion and the th forms of the 3rd plur personal pronoun (they, their, them): furthermore, the morphological simplifications (leading inter alia to loss of grammatical gender) that had been

accepted early in the East Midlands were also in due course accepted into London English. The history of London English appears to be a paradigmatic case of adoption without prestige (in the wide sense that we have distinguished) being involved. It does not seem to be very helpful to speculate that some other kind of prestige must have been involved, or to label the long-term changes as cases of covert prestige or change from below. It seems to be more helpful (in the case of London English) to postulate that its exocentrism depended on the number of weak ties contracted between Londoners and speakers of donor dialects (see J & L Milroy, 1985).

Remembering that changes come about as a result of speaker activity in communities, Andersen's suggestion that the motivation for change within communities arises from a desire for solidarity rather than prestige seems to be generally helpful. Adopting an innovation and resisting innovation - in different communities at different times - can thus both be seen as Acts of Identity (Le Page & Tabouret-Keller (1985): in the one case maintaining the identity of the solidary group, in the other changing its identity or identifying with another group. In our own investigations of dialect-divergent communities in which very variable patterns of change (not necessarily conforming to the predictions of the New York model) have been discovered, we have of course found it vital to focus on the solidary function of language within groups, relating our work closely to ethnographic investigations which do not in themselves focus on language, but on other aspects of solidary behaviour (for example, the work of Bott, 1971 on social network, and more recently the papers in Cohen, 1982). Into our model of the speech community we can now incorporate the idea that language is used symbolically to mark solidarity or social distance, an idea which is familiar in the interactional sociolinguistics of Gumperz and in accounting for (for example) choice of address terms or more generally patterns of polite behaviour (Brown and Levinson, 1987). We have also been deeply influenced in interpreting variation by the perceptions of the distinguished scholar to whom this volume is dedicated, R B Le Page. In the multidimensional space of historical and social language use (Le Page & Tabouret-Keller, 1985), the key social variables that we must investigate are identity variables.

In the remainder of this paper, I should like to focus on instances in current social dialectology that are not satisfactorily accounted for by using prestige (without further elaboration), or by relying on an underlying prestige model, as explanation for change. It should be noted that while such concepts as class, status or rank may be viewed as identity variables interacting with others (such as gender and social network), they have not generally been used this way in the literature, but have served as the key 'prestige' variables in terms of which other patterns of use are interpreted. This is particularly clear in the case of sex, and I shall therefore comment on this first.

Interpreting sex-differentiation

The primacy of the social class 'prestige' model in the interpretative process is clear in most of the work in quantitative social dialectology that has been carried out since 1966. Until recently, there have been few exceptions, apart from our own work (and see now Horvath, 1985). In general, however,

patterns found in other speaker variables, such as age and sex, have often tended to be seen as secondary and interpreted in relation to social class; yet, it is not necessary to assume that social class differences are in all circumstances primary motivators of change or that it would be appropriate in all societies to make this assumption: it is quite possible that speaker variables other than social class are in some cases primary in linguistic variation and change, or that they interact with other variables in a complex way. This could be so, for example, in the case of sex- (or gender-) differentiation in speech.

As gender-differentiation, unlike social class, appears to be universal, it can of course be suggested that gender is a primary identity variable. This implies that males and females speak differently in order to emphasise their gender identity, and not necessarily, or primarily, for social prestige reasons. One of the main findings of our inner-city work in Belfast was that gender-difference, even within a one-class study, was in itself highly consistent (J & L Milroy, 1978, etc). Horvath (1985) has recently re-graphed some of Labov's New York City findings in gender terms and has shown inter alia that the pattern of Nathan B (Labov, 1972) is perfectly consistent if viewed in gender terms and only 'exceptional' if it is viewed primarily in terms of social class. For Nathan B, therefore, it seems that his identity as a male outweighs any supposed membership of some abstractly defined social class grouping. L Milroy (this volume) presents data from Newcastle upon Tyne, which suggests that as there is no overlap between male and female groups for certain variables, gender identity is again primary.

If, however, we view gender differences in terms of a primary SEC model, female norms are virtually always skewed in the same direction: females are usually found to be moving upwards on the SEC continuum. Thus, it has been widely suggested that since females usually have less freedom to be upwardly mobile than males have, they attempt to acquire status (or 'prestige') 'by proxy' through their use of language. This, however, appears to involve a contradiction, as - if it is males who actually acquire social status and prestige - it is difficult to see why male language should not be considered status-ful, and why, for example, the wives of successful men do not simply imitate the language of their husbands (L Milroy, 1987; see also the discussion by Coates, 1986). The prestige-based explanation for gender-differentiation (on which we have so commonly relied) thus seems to have some serious flaws in it.

It may be more illuminating, therefore, to interpret social differentiation (including gender differentiation) in a way that rejects the primacy of prestige in argumentation. Although I have insufficient space to develop it here, I would like to suggest an approach which relies, in the first place, not on prestige, but on observing the social functions of in-group and out-group norms and the different social functions of local and supra-local varieties. We shall bear in mind also Andersen's distinction between open and closed groups. In this kind of interpretation, we have to ask why speakers and social groups sometimes adopt new forms and sometimes do not, and it seems that a costs and benefit analysis may be more illuminating here than the simple and unanalysed notion of prestige. Although human beings are in general resistant to change, it can be suggested that new forms are adopted when the perceived benefit of adoption outweighs the

perceived cost. In the remainder of this paper, I pass on to other examples in which prestige does not in itself appear to explain the phenomena: I shall first refer briefly to patterns of linguistic simplification that have been noted (summarising some points that are more fully developed in forthcoming work): finally, I shall discuss some of the findings of the Philadelphia community studies (as reported in D Sankoff, 1986) in terms of interpretations based on the factors of prestige and/ or solidarity.

Interpreting patterns of simplification

Patterns of phonological and morphological simplification have been widely noted in the literature, and have led to influential generalisations: chiefly that of Jakobson to the effect that dialects which develop supra-local functions tend to develop simpler systems, and that of Herzog and Labov to the effect that in contact situations 'mergers expand at the expense of distinctions' (I am, of course, aware that the notion of simplification is controversial, and I use it here in two ways: a system is simpler if it is describable in terms of fewer rules and/ or if it is observed to have fewer phonemic or inflexional distinctions). One of the essential concerns of the research projects carried out in Belfast was to explore these historical simplification patterns, as it had been noticed that outer-city speech tended to be descriptively simpler than inner-city speech in two major respects. First, sets of allophonic variants, conditioned by following consonant and describable in terms of specified constraints on variation, tended to disappear in outer-city speech. This pattern is discussed by J Milroy (1982) and is set out in a simplified way in Table 1 (and note). Second, sets of lexical alternants (alternating pronunciations for particular lexical sets, as discussed in J Milroy, 1980) also tended to be markedly reduced in the outer city. Recently, taking his cue from Jakobson, Henning Andersen (1986) has also focused on simplification patterns in a wide variety of dialects and has suggested that the various patterns revealed cannot be satisfactorily accounted for in terms of prestige motivation.

TABLE 1: **Idealised representation of phonetic range of /a/ in inner-city Belfast**

[ɛ:]	[æ]	[a]	[ɑ]	[ɔ:]
bag	back	bat	bad	bad
bang		snap	grass	grass
		ant	hand	hand
		back	snap	

Front only: velar environments

Back only: fricative & voiced consonant environments (excluding velars)

Front ~ back: voiceless stop environments (excluding velars)

Note: Outer city speakers display a gradual pattern of rule-loss, leading to convergence in some cases on low-front values for all tokens (J Milroy, 1982).

Indeed, it is perfectly obvious that a desire for prestige cannot possibly account for patterns of phonological or morphological simplification (reduction of contrasts and reduction in the number of rules) as observed in communities, as there is no reason why a 'simplified' dialect should have more or less prestige than a more complex one. Trends to simplification are historically well attested, for example, in the national standard languages of many western European nation states; yet at the same time they are also attested in varieties that are not usually accorded 'prestige' (Pidgin and Creole languages, for example). Similarly, morphological complexity can be a property of languages of both high and low 'status'.

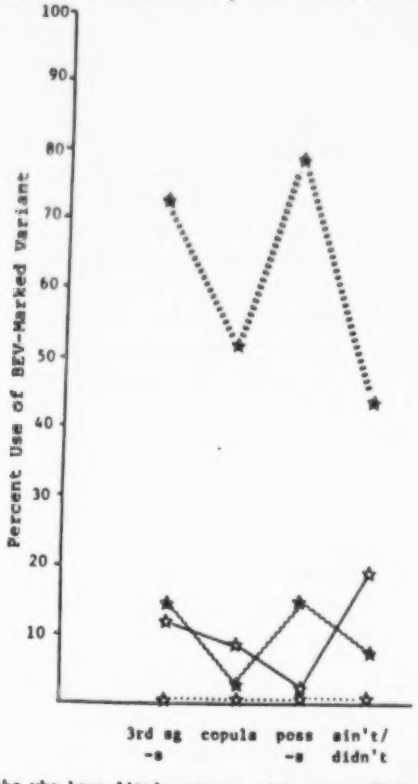
Explanations for these phenomena appear to be more accessible if instead of appealing to prestige we adopt a network-based account, which examines carefully the situations in which groups are open to innovations as against situations where they are not. Using such an approach, we have examined cases where innovations are accepted from outside the close-tie group and have suggested that such innovations are made possible to the extent that relatively weak ties develop in populations (J & L Milroy, 1985). These weak ties are the channels through which new information flows. On the other hand, as Andersen points out, innovations may also develop in closed groups who have little or no contact with the outside world. It seems that this phenomenon can also be accommodated in an identity-based account: in adopting 'exorbitant' internal changes (Andersen, 1986), these closed groups are affirming their separate identity. What we usually call prestige (in the SEC dimension) can also be accommodated in this approach, but the motivation for adopting new forms or abandoning old ones is not the desire for social prestige but (in relatively 'open' groups) the functional need to communicate outside high density/ multiplexity clusters. In such supra-local situations, complicated distinctions that have social and symbolic in-group functions may also become redundant and subject to loss. Thus, we also have here the basis of an explanation for the development of supra-local norms and a reason for expecting simplification patterns to develop in supra-local varieties: it is easier to lose distinctions than to acquire new distinctions from outside varieties. In this perspective, the gender differences that we have discussed can be reinterpreted in terms of female preferences for supra-local rather than localised norms and explanations for this sought in the different socialising habits (or even attitudes) of males and females. Bearing in mind these general points about prestige explanations as against solidarity and identity-based explanations, I end this paper with some limited comments on the findings of the Philadelphia neighbourhood studies.

Interpreting inter-ethnic patterns

Several reports on the Philadelphia studies appear in Sankoff (1986), and it is worth commenting that the idea of prestige in a SEC (and to some extent ethnic) dimension is still very influential in interpreting the variation revealed. Labov & Harris (1986: 20-21) mention the 'prestige' of the localised innovator (who is more important than the 'mainstream' norms such as radio and television); yet, at the same time they speak of the 'dominant' dialect as against the 'dominated'. This is because a group of black speakers who have considerable contact with whites converge towards white morpho-syntactic norms more markedly

than a group of white speakers (who are 'closely associated with black culture') converge towards black norms. Thus, the white dialect is seen as dominant and less subject to change in a non-prestige direction. I do not think that this kind of interpretation gets round the historical contradiction mentioned earlier in this paper (i.e., that dominant dialects are often influenced 'from below'), and, despite the fact that Labov & Harris explicitly reject social network as an interpretative category, it seems to me that some of these findings are open to interpretations based on strong/ weak ties and the identity function of linguistic variation.

FIGURE 1 **Average percent use of BEV-marked morpho-syntactic variants by four groups of speakers**; adapted from Ash & Myhill (1986: 39)



What is particularly noticeable about these two groups (white-oriented blacks and black-oriented whites) is that on morphosyntactic variation their scores average about the same: on copula-deletion and ain't for didn't, the whites actually out-perform the blacks on 'black' variants. What is also noticeable from Figure 1 is that, whereas the 'core' black group uses these features quite variably (presumably also using the 'white' variants), the core white group does not use the 'black' variants at all. Thus, the core black

vernacular (whether or not it is 'dominated') incorporates a resource not available to mainstream white speakers - the capacity to alternate between 'black' and 'white' morphosyntactic variants according to occasion of use. In this perspective, the convergence of white-oriented blacks towards 'white' norms is not so remarkable - as these white norms are already available to them within black vernacular variation. The reason why the white-oriented blacks use the white norms more often than other blacks seems to be accessible through a theory of 'weak ties', as it is clear from the authors' descriptions of these speakers that their contacts with whites are of a classic weak-tie type: they are con-men, hustlers and political activists. The degree to which these speakers use the white norms is increased by the range and number of situations in which they have weak-tie contacts outside their core community. Ash and Myhill (1986: 41) suggest that 'prestige' is involved in this shift towards white norms. I find it very difficult to see in what way an appeal to prestige can explain this type of phenomenon.

The convergence of black-oriented white speakers to 'black' norms is in a sense more remarkable, as the core white dialect does not possess the new variants (copula deletion etc) that they adopt (to a certain extent) in carrying out their act of identity: these outside variants have to be acquired. Although the researchers do not give precise information as to the strength of these speakers' participation in black culture, a theory of innovations (Rogers & Shoemaker, 1971) and weak ties (Granovetter, 1973) would predict that their ties with both communities are likely to be relatively weak: they seem to resemble the peripheral innovators characterised by Rogers & Shoemaker. To explore this point, however, we would need fuller ethnographic information. Clearly, knowing what we all know about the distribution of power in society, the innovations that these whites are introducing are not very likely to penetrate the white community generally. This does not, of course, make the behaviour of these speakers any less innovatory.

Conclusions

I have suggested in this paper that the notion of prestige has been too readily appealed to in explanations of language variation and change, and that such appeals result in apparent contradictions and conceptual confusions. I have also (all too briefly) examined certain instances where a more satisfying explanation can be suggested. It seems that explanations based on the identity-function of language are more successful than blanket appeals to 'prestige' factors, and that notions of prestige can in fact be subsumed (and accounted for) in identity-based explanations.

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